

Old Adam, New Adam, *We*, and Us

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I have a rule of thumb: Anything that Robin Fox writes is worth reading. It's been a useful guide for quite a while — certainly, since Fox first teamed up with his zoologically well-named, occasional collaborator, Lionel Tiger — and continues with his work on *The Tribal Imagination*.

As he writes (and I agree), “We shall never be freed from the tribal imagination as we might be freed from a particular form of economic or political experiment. The result of these experiments in civilization that we call history is still in doubt, and the experiments may well come to an end, but the savage mind is with us forever. The Old Adam will have the Last Word.” Nor is the above as pessimistic as one might think, if only because to be freed from the tribal imagination, “liberated” from the savage mind, is literally to be no longer human.

I am less impressed, however, by what Fox calls the “brightness of the savage mind's flame” than with its stubborn resistance to being extinguished. Although I suspect that I don't really depart from Professor Fox in this regard, let me push the contrast a bit farther: Insofar as it persists within us today, what is notable about the savage mind is less its brightness than, ironically, its dullness: The degree to which it continues to smolder like one of those fires deep in an oil well that can only be extinguished by an explosion (which, in the case of Adams old and new, no sane person would welcome).

Citing Nietzsche and Fukuyama, Fox suggests that the “Old Adam” will necessarily be dissatisfied, rebelling against the “security” of modern civilization. I believe it is unclear whether on balance modern civilization will in

fact offer much in the way of security (since what it giveth via public health and at least the promise of a full belly it taketh away via overpopulation and the threat of ecological disaster, not to mention “enhanced” war-waging technologies), but this aside, I think it is indeed likely that the Old Adam will be dissatisfied in any event, largely because of the huge and growing disconnect between our biological and our cultural evolution. Thus, *Homo sapiens* is unique among living things in the extent to which we are stuck between two dissimilar processes: biological evolution, which is slow and Darwinian, and cultural evolution, which is fast and Lamarckian (Barash 1986). As a result, among other problems, the savage mind has been equipped with technologic capacities for which it is woefully and dangerously unprepared (Barash and Lipton 1985).

I would suggest that the problem is less a basic human desire for recognition (*thymos*, as Fox suggests) than an even more basic desire — or rather, a suite of desires — all of them deriving from our basic human nature, formed during the million plus years that our ancestors spent occupying the African savannahs ... and earlier. Moreover, our atavistic impulses aren't only tribal (although they are that); they are also sexual, parental, nepotistic, and so forth, and they threaten to conflict with any mandated social systems that deny the existence of such impulses or — more provocatively yet — seek to contravene them.

In this regard, we might usefully look to a creative human impulse: The penchant to imagine dystopias. I believe that there have been three towering examples of literary dystopias in the 20th century, and significantly, all involve tragic efforts to impose biologically inappropriate sociocultural structure upon various heroic Old Adams, outfitted as they are with their savage minds.

Best known of these (iconic almost to the point of caricature) are Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and

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George Orwell's *1984*. In the former, the aptly named John the Savage is particularly unable to deal with the bloodless vitiation of courtship and male-male competition. He cannot deal with a world in which the "primitive" dance of human sexual pursuit is replaced by state-sanctioned promiscuity. Our Savage — ourself? — yearns to prevail in male-male competition, in order to *earn* sex with Lenina, and is horrified by the thought that she will copulate with him, or with any other man, without prior effort and work, without passion or risk. Old Adam would understand.

In our own not-so-brave real world, of course, not everyone believes that there is something fundamental about being, or staying, human. Some argue that people are entirely shaped by their experiences; according to them, everyone is putty and there isn't much, after all, to Fox's "tribal mentality." Denied human nature, no one could really lay claim to being much of anything, beyond an empty vessel waiting passively to be filled by whatever the environment (socially constructed or not) has in store, and everyone would therefore be at the mercy of those movers and shakers and shapers who control the various "inputs" that presumably make people what they are. But as Winston Smith learns — and demonstrates — in *1984*, and as Robin Fox points out so cogently, human nature *does* exist: It lies in relationships, in meaningful action, and, when called upon, in resistance to a dehumanizing society.

In justifying his nightmare world, O'Brien — torturer and thought policeman — explains to Winston Smith and to the reader that "you are imagining that there is something called human nature which will be outraged by what we do and will turn against us. But we create human nature. Men are infinitely malleable." But O'Brien, like the Director in *Brave New World*, is wrong. People are immensely malleable, more so, in all likelihood, than any other species. But not *infinitely*. Nonetheless, it is precisely such asserted distortions of biological reality that make *1984*, as with *Brave New World* before it, so frightening and so relevant to our current discussion.

The third — and in my opinion, the greatest — dystopian creation of the 20th century is also the least known: *We*, written by the early Soviet-era dissident writer, Yevgeny Zemyatin, several decades before the work of Huxley and Orwell. With chilling brilliance, it foreshadows most of their themes and has emerged, among the literary cognoscenti, as perhaps *the* classic dystopian novel. (Written in 1921–22, *We* was denied publication in the Soviet Union, and was unavailable to Russian readers until the 1990s; it has been widely and increasingly admired in the West, however.)

Life in Zemyatin's "One State," orchestrated by the Great Benefactor, is carried on by numbers, not individuals. There are no primitive passions, no instincts, no room for an Old Adam or tribal mentality; everything is designed

with mathematical precision. Nature — which is both feared and hated — has been banished behind the Green Wall. As the narrator, D-503, explains, "Man ceased to be a savage only when we had built the Green Wall, when we had isolated our perfect mechanical world from the irrational, hideous world of trees, birds, animals." Much as D-503, and the rest of his society may try to repress his nature with glass, barriers, and laws, D-503 experiences an inexplicable but altogether human deficit of reason and falls in love with the gorgeous I-330. It turns out that she is a revolutionary, seeking the overthrow of the Great Benefactor himself, and his dystopian state. As their romance develops — while the inhabitants of *We* are about to journey into outer space, to seek alien species and subject them to the beneficent yoke of biology-destroying reason — D-503 explores his own inner space, finding therein a living, breathing, hormonally responding individual who yearns for basic biological satisfaction, and who (as with Winston Smith and John the Savage), flirts with resistance and rebellion only to end up being totally subjugated, while his lover is tortured to death.

Despite this rather depressing story line, there is considerable humor — albeit darkly colored — as well as sarcasm in Zemyatin's masterpiece. Also, intimations of hope: At the end, we learn that rebellion persists in the hinterlands, and D-503 succeeds in smuggling another "number," pregnant with his child, beyond the Green Wall, where she will propagate the literal seeds of revolt. Altogether, *We* is a devastating critique of too much reason and too little messy, unreasonable biology.

In Zemyatin's One State, devotion to reason required commitment to the "divinely bounding wisdom" of barriers in general and of the great wall in particular, which separated biology from rational, civilized artifice. The reader is soon made aware, however, of the horror of isolating our natural tendencies: Through that wall, on the other side of the massive glass barrier that sits at the cornerstone of his inhuman society, D-503 saw "the blunt snout of some beast star[ing] dully, mistily at me; yellow eyes, persistently repeating a single, incomprehensible thought." He is then left with this not-so-surprising insight: That outside the Green Wall is more real, more whole, more natural than in. And so, D-503 asks himself, and the reader, whether "he, this yellow-eyed creature, in his disorderly, filthy mound of leaves, in his uncomputed life, is happier than we are?"

The "numbers" who inhabit the One State of *We* are supposed to be happy, or at least, are constantly reminded that they are. Those about to depart for new worlds, for example, are told "You will subjugate the unknown beings on other planets, who may still be living in the primitive condition of freedom, to the beneficent yoke of happiness. If they fail to understand that we bring them mathematically infallible happiness, it will be our duty to compel them to be

happy.” Probably the major component of such “happiness” is familiar to readers of *1984* and *Brave New World*, and its flaws are equally familiar to anyone with a smattering of biology: Rational, logical, precise control over sex and reproduction leaves much for a biological critter to desire. In trying to keep its members from reproducing “like animals,” the One State ignored a fundamental flaw in its glorious, uber-scientific plan: Those “numbers” are, in fact, animals, creatures with a “nature” whose naturalness is not diminished by also being “human.”

Just as people in normal life often encounter various *memento mori*, *mementi animalum* pop up unavoidably in the One State and in D-503’s psyche: “Even in our time the wild, ape-like echo still occasionally rises from somewhere below, from some shaggy depth.” Naturally, it is that shaggy depth that especially interests the reader — as it does the biologist and should interest the social scientist as well — even as it disconcerts D-503. Our hero ends up feeling — to his surprise, but not the reader’s — lust, love, and even sexual jealousy, though the One State proclaimed a “*Lex Sexualis*” in which “each number has a right to any other number, as to a sexual commodity” (*Brave New World*, anyone?). D-503’s animal nature insists on being a sexy, self-involved individual, not just a number in a vast, logically structured, marvelously efficient insect colony. Indeed, the insect parallel is quite explicit in *We*: Just replace “six-wheeled” in the following paragraph with “six-legged.”

Every morning, with six-wheeled precision, at the same hour and the same moment, we — millions of us — get up as one. At the same hour, in million-headed unison, we start work; and in million-headed unison we end it. And, fused into a single million-handed body, at the same second, designated by the Table, we lift our spoons to our mouths. At the same second, we come out for our walk, go to the auditorium, go to the hall for Taylor exercises, fall asleep ...

Intuitively, this human-insect meld is a distasteful notion, and not just because of a common aversion to insects *per se*. The “eusocial Hymenoptera” (ants, bees and wasps) are particularly prominent in manifesting an unusual system of personal self-abnegation. These creatures are, in their own way, beloved by evolutionary biologists, because of their unique social and genetic system. Yet their “lifestyle” is horrifying in direct proportion as it is literally inhuman, denying so much that the Old Adam has evolved to cherish.

Since people do not possess the unique chromosomal arrangement of social insects (technically known as

haplodiploidy), and so are evolutionarily more fit reproducing sexually and selfishly, it is dystopian in the extreme to squeeze human beings into a bee-hive or an ant-hill. One way to deal with such deformation of human needs is to suffer: witness *We*. Another is to laugh. Which brings me to *Antz*, an animated movie that began with a hilarious scene in which Z, a troubled ant (with the voice of Woody Allen), is speaking to a therapist, while in the background millions of other ants hum and work and perform their appointed tasks, without complaining and in apparently happy unison, in the background:

Z: “All my life, I’ve lived and worked in the big city ... which is kind of a problem, since I’ve always felt uncomfortable in crowds. I feel ... isolated. Different. ... The whole system just ... makes me feel ... insignificant. ...”

Therapist: “Terrific! You should feel insignificant!”

Z: “I should?”

Therapist: “Yes! You know, people ask me, ‘Doctor, why are you always happy?’ And I tell them it’s mind over matter. I don’t mind that I don’t matter! Do you get it? Do you get it? ... Being an ant is being able to say, ‘Hey — I’m meaningless, you’re meaningless.’”

Z: “But — but I’ve always felt life was about finding meaning ... and then sharing it with someone special, someone you love.”

Therapist: “Z, you need help. (he looks at a clock) Whoops! We’re gonna have to stop there. Your minute is up! ... Now back to work! We’ve made real progress! Remember — let’s be the best superorganism we can be!”

The reality is that the best superorganism a human being can be is a terrible superorganism indeed, or a terribly unhappy human being, one whose enforced *We* is unlikely ever to be reconciled with the biological “me.” The “savage mind” gets this, as does Robin Fox. The sooner the rest of social science catches up, the better.

Further Reading

Barash, D. P. 1986. *The Hare and the Tortoise: The conflict between biology and culture in human affairs*. New York: Viking.

Barash, D. P., & Lipton, J. E. 1985. *The Caveman and the Bomb: Human nature, evolution, and nuclear war*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

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